



Book Review

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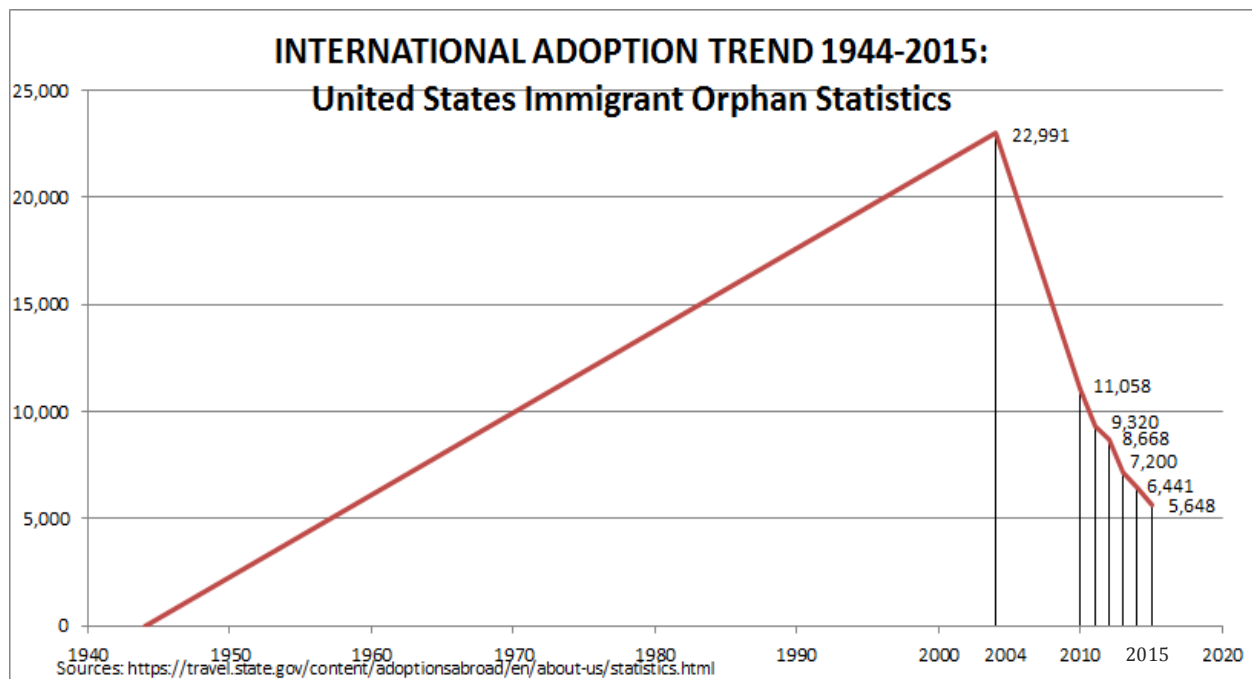
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Compton, Rebecca J. *Adoption Beyond Borders*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016, 235 pp. US, \$27.95, ISBN 978-0-19-024779-9.

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INTRODUCTION

This is one of the very best, most important books written on the plight of unparented children worldwide, and the role international adoption can and should play for such children. It comes at a moment of crisis, when it is especially important for policy makers and others to recognize the stakes for children, and to focus on the facts rather than the myths that are so prevalent in this area. Some 10 to 14 million children are living – and dying – in institutions, with the numbers regularly escalating. The best source of homes for these children at the present time is international adoption. Yet such adoption is being systematically, deliberately shut down. As shown by the below chart, the number of adoptions into the United States has dropped by 75% since 2004. The number into all countries combined has dropped by 50%.



This book speaks to a very broad audience, in a language suitable for all. It speaks to policy makers both here in the U.S. and abroad, governmental and non-profit. It speaks to professionals who advise adoptive parents and work with adopted children. It speaks to adoptive parents who

Compton, Rebecca J. Adoption Beyond Borders (p. 2 of 6)

want to think deeply about their decisions both in becoming parents and in raising children. It speaks to those interested in research, summarizing the important evidence developed to date, and illuminating what we truly are today in a position to know, as well as what would be worth exploring in the future.

This book is written brilliantly. It is clear, and clear-eyed, exposing common myths for what they are, questioning accepted dogma. It is thorough while still wonderful compact, with only 166 pages of text (supplemented by detailed, scholarly endnotes). It is poignant and moving. It is compelling.

This book is indisputably scientific in its approach to facts. Compton knows of what she speaks. She is trained as an academic psychologist and neuroscientist. (p.7) She understands the importance of stories. But she makes a compelling case for science: “The scientific method requires moving beyond anecdote, emotion, and rhetoric to examine systematic patterns of data.” She says that in this book she has combined story “with evidence from decades of psychology and neuroscience research on the ways that effective nurturance can be provided to promote healthy development.” (p.7)

This book is balanced, entirely fair in airing all important positions. But it is hard-hitting, insisting on what the evidence tells us about the important facts, and how those facts should drive policy.

Compton keeps the focus on her chosen core issue: the facts related to child best interests. The first part of her book focuses on the facts related to the adopted child, and how that child is affected by the denial of nurturing parenting, in particular through institutionalization. The second part focuses on the facts related to adoptive parents, and how children do in their care. Compton makes a powerful case for why, if we look at the facts and think that child best interests should be key, as virtually all say they should be, then we would change policy governing international adoption to enable more children to find the loving homes available in such adoption.

KEY QUALITIES

Compton combines wonderful features rarely found in the same book. She uses poignant stories to help illustrate her points, primarily the story of her own adoption of a child called Aldanysh from Kazakhstan. This is helpful. It is important to know that the evidence shows children are damaged by delays in permanency, and that the policies that require such delays are thus inconsistent with child best interests. But it is compelling in a different way to read how Aldanysh was abandoned to a baby house at the age of 3 months, but then had to wait out the 6-month period during which he could only be considered for adoption in-country, was then matched with Compton and her husband at 9 months, but was still kept in the baby house by

legal and bureaucratic restrictions until finally being placed in their custody at 20 months. (pp.37, 39) They organized their lives to stay in Kazakhstan during this time so they could at least visit him on a daily basis. But these kinds of all-too-popular “subsidiarity” and related policies doom most abandoned children to a far worse fate.

Compton’s stories are combined with a powerful scholarly analysis of the scientific evidence. Compton speaks decisively and persuasively about the available social and medical science. She can explain in simple but accurate language the difference between gold standard social science and other social science, between controlled experimental studies and correlational studies, and why the former can better explain causality, and are thus more helpful in understanding reality and guiding policy. (p.139) Compton is thoroughly familiar with the available evidence, so that she can discuss it in persuasive depth, summarize it succinctly without omitting important issues, and highlight the most important studies.

Compton combines scientific sophistication with common sense and deep insight. She has a clear moral compass. For example, she demonstrates that children can often recover significantly in adoptive homes from damage suffered previously. But then she goes on:

The evidence that children may have resilience against early adversity...should not be seen as a reason to take less seriously the toll of early deprivation. From a moral standpoint, we should not accept the premise that the damage done by institutionalization is tolerable because it can be compensated for later in life. The promise of a future possibility of rehabilitation does not give license to inflict injury. (pp.55-56)

Compton does not simply summarize existing evidence in a brilliantly succinct and powerful way. She explores original territory and develops ideas that I have not seen elsewhere that are extraordinarily interesting and important. Thus she explores the issue of whether the adoptive parent-child bond is similar to and as strong as the bond between the biologically related parent and child. (pp.86-102) This is a central issue in the policy debate. Much of the negative policy surrounding adoption is based on assumptions that the adoptive bond is inherently weaker because we are genetically driven to love best the children born to us. Compton looks at this issue in depth, reviews the available animal and human research, and then goes on to discuss the science on the role of hormones in caregiving behavior. She concludes that:

[A]doptive parenting is “natural” in the sense that it comes to us through evolution and involves the body’s physiological systems of bonding. Adoption exists throughout the animal kingdom as well as throughout human societies, and therefore presumably is part of our species’ evolutionary heritage. The biological mechanisms of bonding involved in adoptive parenting likely share much in common with the biological mechanisms of birth

parenting and other strong social bonds. These considerations challenge the common belief that adoptive parenting is somehow unnatural. (p.102)

Compton, Rebecca J. Adoption Beyond Borders (p. 4 of 6)

Compton is wonderfully fair. She is persuasive in part because she takes seriously counter-claims. But this does not prevent her from coming to conclusions that condemn current policy and the dominant orthodoxy.

TELLING POINTS

The book consists of two main parts, with the first focused on the adopted child and the second on the adoptive parent and family.

In each part Compton focuses on the evidence, assessing it and distilling it to the core points relevant to decision-making by policy makers and others. Thus in Part 1 she analyzes the social and medical science related to the devastating impact on children of institutionalization. She also analyzes the degree to which that impact can be alleviated by the kind of nurturing parenting available in adoption. In Part 2 she analyzes the evidence on the quality of parenting generally provided by adoptive parents, and the nature of these adoptive families.

In each part Compton addresses myths common to the debate about international adoption. She explains the difference between anecdotes and systematic research. So, for example, she discusses the notorious case involving a boy named Artyom adopted from Russia who was sent back on a plane by his adoptive mother with a note saying she just couldn't handle him anymore. (pp.3-4) This case was used by many to attack international adoption and call for yet further restrictions. Compton acknowledges the awfulness of this case, but at the same time points out that during a 2-year period some 30,000 children were returned to Russian orphanages by Russian adoptive or foster parents. (p.104) She cites evidence showing that adoptive parents are generally less likely to mistreat children than other groups. (p.105) She acknowledges that there have been some 19 confirmed cases of death of Russian adoptees in the U.S. as a result of abuse and neglect, but goes on to say that the actual death-by-abuse rate of Russian children by adoptive parents in the U.S. overall is 0.03%, by comparison to a reported rate of 0.72% death-by-abuse rate of Russian children by Russian parents. (p.104) She cites evidence indicating that adoptive parents are generally less likely to mistreat children than other parents. (p.105) And she sums up the evidence on adoptive parents: "In my experience, only one stereotype about adoptive parents holds true, and that is that they are tenacious fighters for the rights of 'their' children." (p.10)

Compton also contrasts this Artyom story to another story, one she points out received by contrast almost no media attention. This second story she calls "death by bureaucracy." It involves a girl in Kyrgyzstan named Altynai who was matched for adoption with an American family, but died as a result of medical issues combined with bureaucratic delays and ultimately

the shutdown of the adoption program, a shutdown that prevented her escaping the orphanage to the family which could have provided the needed medical care. (pp.4-5) Compton's book helps show that some version of the unreported Altynai story is the typical story, as such shutdowns

Compton, Rebecca J. Adoption Beyond Borders (p. 5 of 6)

regularly subject children either to death or, more often, destruction of their chances for any kind of fulfilling life.

Compton addresses issues important to adoptive parents in making decisions about whether and also how to parent. For example, she talks about how to think about the child's national and other heritage, and how to think about the child's relationship with birth families. In dealing with these issues she provides a compelling and refreshing combination of research evidence, common sense, and wisdom. Of course it's important to honor one's child's heritage. But at the same time parents need to think about whether for their child going to a heritage summer camp is the right choice. And decisions as to whether a child should make contact with birth families are complicated. For adopted children heritage involves a rich mix that includes the adoptive family and the country and culture in which the child is living. More birth heritage is not necessarily better, as many adoptive parents are conditioned now to believe. The social science indicates instead: "What may matter most for adoptees' well-being is not the degree of their identification with birth ethnicity alone, but the extent to which the adoptee perceives harmony instead of conflict between the different aspects of his or her cultural identities." (p.69)

And on openness with birth families, Compton advises that the adoption community "avoid replacing one rigid ideology with another." (p.78) "The expectation that an adoptee must or should want to 'find her roots' reflects an understanding of kinship and identity that privileges genetic essentialism, a culturally constructed belief that one's essence is genetically grounded." (p.79)

Compton ends with important conclusions and recommendations that are persuasive because they are firmly grounded in the factual evidence with which the book is packed. She says that the research "overwhelmingly affirms the conclusion that international adoption benefits children." (p.147) She also takes on frontally many of the accepted myths in the field. Given the evidence that children benefit from prompt placement in nurturing homes, she says that those who support policies favoring in-country options that result in placement delays "must recognize and defend the reality that such policies are designed to serve political ends rather than the developmental needs of the child." (p.148) She notes the limited success in increasing in-country adoption, and the absence of evidence that it actually serves child interests better than international adoption. Indeed she points out that the only study of the issue indicates better outcomes for internationally adopted children. She takes on the claim that international adoption involves systematic child trafficking. "Orphanages themselves, not adoptions, create the greatest threat of genuine trafficking." (p.163) She questions the constant emphasis on reunification with

birth parents, noting that the evidence shows that it usually works out worse for children than adoption or foster care. (p.165-66)

Compton, Rebecca J. Adoption Beyond Borders (p. 6 of 6)

This is as I said at the start a really important book. It could help move the world toward changes that would better serve the interests of some of the world's most needy children. You should read this book, and then get as many others as possible to read it in turn. Then we might all help change the world for children.